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PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR  
DE RUEHLB #0351/01 0851423  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 261423Z MAR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4526  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3610  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3813  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000351

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT  
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON  
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/24/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 SHORT-SIGHTED ON SHIA OUTREACH,  
SAYS PROMINENT SHIA FAMILY

REF: A. BEIRUT 347

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 234

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Ambassador Khalil al-Khalil, retired Lebanese Ambassador and figurehead of a prominent Shia family based in Tyre, told the Ambassador March 24 that the historical exclusion of the Shia community by the ruling majorities of other confessions was the primary reason behind Hizballah's strength. Ambassador Khalil complained especially about the lack of credible Shia representation in the current majority March 14 coalition -- a refrain we have heard from other contacts as well. He accused March 14 of short-sightedness and lacking leadership. Despite this, Ambassador Khalil confirmed he would seek an MP seat in Tyre during the June 7 parliamentary elections. Other Shia "independents," he said, planned to do the same in other areas of the south: Nabatieh, Bint Jbeil, Jezzine, and Zahrani. Based on credibility and solid messaging, Ambassador Khalil anticipated that these candidates could gain 20-30 percent of the vote, even if they did not win seats in parliament. Ambassador Khalil, a former ambassador to Iran, praised President Obama's March 20 Nowruz message to the Iranian people, although he said he did not expect a change in behavior by the Iranian leadership. End summary.

KHALIL BROTHERS  
ON SHIA EXCLUSION  
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[1](#)2. (C) Retired Lebanese Ambassador Khalil al-Khalil and his brothers, Nasser and Karim al-Khalil, told the Ambassador and Poloff that the exclusion of the Shia community in Lebanon was a primary reason for the strength of Hizballah. Meeting with the Ambassador March 24 in his Beirut office, Ambassador Khalil argued that vast numbers of "respectable" Lebanese Shia do not truly support Hizballah, yet suffer from disorganization and lack effective mechanisms to challenge Hizballah's network or finances. Other political groups, such as the current majority March 14 coalition, have excluded Shia participation in the political process, to the

detriment of the Shia and March 14, the Khalil brothers analyzed. Nasser accused other groups of not having any interest in the Shia file, unless they could manipulate it.

13. (C) Ambassador Khalil reported that in 2005, when the March 14 coalition was formed, he and other prominent Shia figures went to the top leadership of March 14 (including Sunni leader Saad Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel) and advised them not to exclude Shia from the coalition and not pursue a policy that attempted to split Nabih Berri's Amal party from Hizballah, the two largest Shia parties. Khalil called that policy "futile" and "short-sighted," a familiar refrain that we have heard from other Shia contacts (reftels). He accused March 14 of lacking proper leadership and vision, and questioned its ability to run a country if it continued to exclude an entire group. He requested U.S. assistance to intercede with March 14's leadership to recognize the Shia community.

ELECTIONS: "IT'S A MISTAKE TO GIVE  
HIZBALLAH A FREE HAND"

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14. (C) Ambassador Khalil confirmed, however, that he and several like-minded Shia figures plan to contest the June 7 parliamentary elections in various regions in south Lebanon. The Khalil family, a prominent Shia family based in Tyre, began its political life before the start of the Ottoman period, Ambassador Khalil proudly reported. The family's political position, he said, continues to support a "free and independent" Lebanon that respects its various sects. Khalil

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anticipated that he would run for an MP seat in Tyre, while his other "independent" Shia allies planned to run for seats in Nabatieh, Bint Jbeil, Jezzine, and Zahrani in the south. Even if these candidates did now win seats as MPs, if they obtained 20-30 percent of the vote, it would provide hope to the Shia community that neither Hizballah nor Amal were the only options for representation.

15. (C) The Khalil brothers called the reticence to run electoral campaigns in the south by Shia who are not with Hizballah or Amal a "mistake." If Hizballah and its allies were left unchallenged, Hizballah would have a "free hand" to focus its electoral energies in other important districts, such as Beirut and in the Bekaa, the Khails reasoned. However, for independents to run effective campaigns, it would be necessary for the candidates to be viewed as credible by the electorates in the southern districts, they said.

16. (C) Ahmad al-Assaad, another "independent" Shia personality from a prominent family in south Lebanon (Hasbaya-Marjaayoun), was one such example, Ambassador Khalil said. Assaad, accused by many of spending money to buy votes, but not creating a sustainable political base, was not "credible" to many voters because he is not physically present in the south, operating from Beirut, Ambassador Khalil explained. While Ambassador Khalil said he did not agree with Assaad's tactics, he said he supported Assaad and did not unequivocally rule out the possibility of working with him.

17. (C) Messaging, in addition to credibility, was also important, Ambassador Khalil said. He said it was ineffectual for any political party or individual to say that it was against Hizballah's weapons arsenal. This, he claimed, was for the international community to deal with as it was the GOL, Israel, Syria, France and the U.S. who brokered an "understanding" in 1996 to stop the fighting between Israel and Lebanon, but at the same time recognized the legitimacy of Hizballah's military strength. A more effective message, he said, was to show that Hizballah sought hegemony by creating policies that pushed people towards extremism and split communities. As proof, Ambassador Khalil

said the audience applauded when he raised these issues during his speeches to southern residents during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The Lebanese Shia community, he argued, was not "extreme," but was being dragged in that direction by Hizballah.

DEVELOPMENT NEEDS IN  
SOUTH LEBANON  
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¶8. (C) Ambassador Khalil and his brothers requested U.S. assistance to improve the state of public institutions and services in south Lebanon. They complained that institutions of higher education were nonexistent in the south, although the demand was great. Medical services and housing, they said, were also deficient. To make small improvements in these areas would lay the foundation to building a stronger community that was not reliant on Hizballah's services, they argued. The Ambassador explained that the embassy, through its USAID programs and MEPI small grant fund, could consider specific project proposals for areas in the south and would welcome new ideas from local communities.

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S NOWRUZ  
MESSAGE "EXCELLENT," BUT  
PESSIMISM ABOUT IRAN PERSISTS  
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¶9. (C) Ambassador Khalil, a former Ambassador to Iran (1971-1978), called President Obama's March 20 Nowruz message to the Iranian people "excellent." He said it was an "intelligent message" that recognized the culture and history of Iran. While he and his contacts believed the message was a positive signal, Ambassador Khalil was not optimistic that

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the U.S. or the rest of the world would see any change in the behavior of the Iranian religious or political leadership. Nasser Khalil added that Lebanon's delicate confessional balance was being "disturbed" by Iran through Hizballah, and created "an inappropriate and dangerous imbalance."

COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) Ambassador Khalil, a long-time embassy contact, reserved his greatest complaints for the March 14 leadership. There are no signs that March 14 is taking any serious steps to counteract the perception although some, notably Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, have acknowledged the lack of credible Shia representation within the coalition. March 14 Secretariat staff charged with developing a Shia task force criticized the traditional Shia families (such as the al-Khalils and the al-Assaads) for stifling new Shia political representation. One contact compared the established Lebanese Shia families with "going back to the Shah after the Iranian revolution."

¶11. (C) Hizballah and Amal have announced their intentions to run candidates in the south, but to date, have spent far less time reaching out to voters there than in other areas, contacts tell us, because of the assumption that the southern districts will present easy victories for them and the March 8 alliance. End comment.

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